

'BEING YOURSELF IS MORE THAN TRYIN' TO BE SOMEBODY ELSE'

An Interview with Robert Shaw: Austin, Texas, July 21st 1975

Robert Springer

Robert 'Fud' Shaw, the last survivor of the Southern Texas blues pianists, is an incredible talker, an interviewer's dream: one question is often enough to trigger off long detail-filled answers from the resources of his phenomenal memory. Needless to say, my interest never flagged while I taped his words. Additionally, Mr. Shaw, although he only plays occasionally in public, has kept his interest in the piano and music in general. He practises often and seriously, buys sheet-music and learns new pieces. To top it all off, Mr. and Mrs. Shaw form a happy couple, apparently devoid of financial worries. But that's thanks to Robert Shaw's grocery store . . . Whoever heard of a bluesman getting rich on his music?

Shaw: I was born in Stafford, Texas, about twelve miles from Houston, on August 9th 1908. My daddy owned a ranch in Fort Bend County and Stafford.

Springer: So where did you grow up? Partly on the ranch and partly in the city . . . ?

Shaw: That's how we grew up, from the city out to the ranch. You see, Ash County and Fort Bend County, they joins.

Springer: What started your interest in the piano?

Shaw: You see, that was in Prohibition time, when I was a little boy along at that time and, oh I liked to see the women dancin' and hug them fellers playin' the piano and have fun. And, you know how a boy is: he take a likin' to something he grow and, like, I was just a person liked to do something to make other people happy.

Springer: Did anybody play in the family?

Shaw: My mother did and I got another sister plays the piano and I got a baby sister plays and I had another brother played but he died. My mother could play guitar too. She could do most anything.

Springer: What sort of music was she playing?

Shaw: She play spiritual music. You know, that's a rare thing about music when you start to learnin' music if you go to learnin' it: you play a little spiritual, you play a little jazz, you play a little blues, you don't know where you gonna end up at! You realize yourself, you catch on to yourself somewhere along that line there and then you find out where you're goin'. You have a beat as easy . . . and you become acculturated to it and you just got your right feel and your right bounce! It's the same in playin' the piano. You'll find out what type of pianist



Robert Shaw (Mike Rowe)

you wanna be, whether you wanna be a group musician in the piano field or a soloist. Lotsa difference! If you gonna be a soloist, you gonna have to learn enough about the keyboard to know a soloist key. See, when you by yourself, you can't use a key like C and A and get back there, the spaces is too far apart! That's the reason you see a group piano-player have such a hard time tryin' to play a number by himself. Soloist keys you can get back on time, the spaces is not so far apart. Now, you take G, F, B flat and E, now, them's my pet keys! I can play asleep in G and B flat!

Springer: Did your mother play different music on the guitar and on piano?

Shaw: My mama loved to dance. She could play the ragtime, but mostly she played spiritual music on the piano and also on the guitar. When I was a little boy we didn't have but two songs in America to have fun off of and dance and you know what that was? 'It's A Long Way To Tipperary' and 'St. Louis Blues'! And they just as popular now as they was then, but these modern piano-players, they can't fool with *that* kind of music, too rough for 'em! Uh-uh! Now, W.C. Handy he wrote this number, but the guy in Houston is the one that really made that piece popular. Just like he was a guy like Louis Armstrong, but they got no record of him. His name was Sid Owl. He was a fellow just about my colour, a little heavier and a little taller, but, man, he could tear the trumpet on those pieces! That's the reason the 'St. Louis Blues' is what they are today is on account of *him*! I guess you heard about the black people celebratin' the 19th of June. Well, the largest 19th of June we had in the State of Texas happened in Brenham, Texas and he played that picnic every year. Now, you could get him other places any time of the year, but wasn't no use tryin' to get him on 19th of June 'cause he had to come to Brenham. He played Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Springer: That was one of the Emancipation celebrations . . . ?

Shaw: Yeah, that's when they knew they were free. It happened before then, but that's when they knew it for sure. But you know how people do when they keep something away from you . . .

Springer: In other places it's on the 4th of August or whatever . . .

Shaw: That's right.

Springer: Did your mother play any blues?

Shaw: I tell you when the blues really got to its peak was in about 1919. The 'St. Louis Blues' was on the market then. Wasn't anyone knew anything about music. Well, it was a long time before kids got up large enough to really learn enough about music to teach it, learn the notes to learn the kids the music. But there's a few students backing the older students, the senior group, you see, that knew about, oh you take along in '12 and getting back around '10 and '9, it was just no musicians along then. Very few! Tell you 'bout this guy Sid Owl. You could hear his trumpet five miles! Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta ta ta ta! [Imitates the trumpet on the first few bars of 'St. Louis Blues']. And then the people were choppin' cotton and cuttin' bushes, and they'd throw them hoes and canes out of their way and they gonna be dancin' till Saturday night! Oh man, they used to have good times! In those early days, I was a little boy, women wore white midi-blouses and blue skirts. They was just crazy about this style of dressing as they are wigs today! If you gave a woman a blue skirt and a white midi-blouse, you couldn't tell her nothin'! Somebody was gonna get stepped on for sure! (laughs) I tell you!

Springer: Was your mother very strict about keeping spirituals and blues separate?

Shaw: She kept it separate all the way. Now, today the spiritual songs don't have the feelin' that they used to have, 'cause they don't sing 'em the way they used to sing 'em. They put too much in it, too much beat in it and make it too jazzy. And it don't start people thinkin'

like it really should.

Springer: But when you started playing the piano around the house, you weren't playing spiritual music?

Shaw: No.

Springer: And your mother didn't say anything against it?

Shaw: No. Uh-uh.

Springer: Did you start playing the piano because all your family was playing or because of other people outside? You told me sometimes you'd see piano-players at other people's places . . .

Shaw: Well, that's true. That's how I heard the boogie woogie. That came out of Louisiana. First time I heard 'Pinetop's Boogie Woogie' was at some friends' house . . . Well, it's like anything. You know, a kid, like we see them kids out there a while ago [here Robert Shaw refers to a couple of kids from the neighbourhood who had passed in front of his house while we were sitting on the porch], them two adolescent kids about twelve or thirteen years old. They wanted to fight. Now, that's all a kid know, but that's about as stupid a trick as a person could think of, is fight. Because you might get scratched up and lose the fight, you don't know what's gonna happen. It's best to get out of those things if there's any way possible. Somebody's gotta jump on me, 'cause I sure ain't gonna start it. It's stupid! And so, whatever we felt like playin', whatever type, was all right. She done it like the Bible said. But now they puts too much with the Bible. I believe the Bible leads more people goin' the other way than the way they're supposed to go. Because the Bible explains and reads and speaks and it don't take none of your life away from you: it tells you how to do your life. Don't do nothing what's gonna cause harm or damnation to other folks. It tell you it's time to whistle, it's time to sing, it's time to dance . . . it didn't tell you what kind of dancin' to do. It tell you it's time to *dance!* It's *in there!* And then here come someone readin' that same scripture, come back 'Oh, you cannot dance! You goin' to hell!'. Now what do *he* know? I believes in Christianity! It's good. Learns you how to carry yourself. But lots of people they just carries it too far! And I'll tell you, they have done so much harm, they have drove more people away from the Church and Christianity than they have helped.

Springer: Did you have any music and piano lessons when you were young?

Shaw: No, they wouldn't let me come in there when the ladies was in there!

Springer: What do you mean?

Shaw: In the home! When I was a little boy, my dad didn't believe in nothin' but diggin' in the ground, runnin' a cow or writin' in a book and all such as that. He believed in *that* (laughs). My sisters were takin' music lessons. Plenty music round the house, but I could never get close enough to it to learn E from D!

Springer: So when did you start to learn?

Shaw: After I got up and got on my own and earned me a little money and went to a music teacher *myself*. I was about fifteen, sixteen years old. And now they have to take their hats off to me. But they fought me when I was tryin' to learn. That was in the late teens and early twenties. I commenced to gettin' good 'long 'bout '28, '29. It's the funniest thing you ever saw in your life about this music: when you begin to learn it and after you get on the right road, it come to you so fast you ain't got room to hold it.

Springer: How did you get the piano style you're playing?

Shaw: When I was thirteen, fourteen, I'd slip off to go down to them dancing places see those piano-players, at the road-houses, places in Houston and out in the country. And in Prohibition time, there was a lot of party-houses. And that's where they were playin'. In Prohibition time when there was bootleg whiskey, you go to practically any nice home, you find

fifteen, twenty people in there drinkin'!

Springer: Really?

Shaw: Sure! They couldn't get no money no other way! In 1927, '28, '29, you could find . . . it was no money, it was no work to do . . . the average man, I don't care how big a family he had, he wasn't makin' over twelve, fifteen dollars a week. So he had to get it some kinda way. So they put the whiskey in a pitcher and they set that pitcher right close to the sink. If the police break in you and arrest you, he had to have some evidence, but he couldn't get none out of that, 'cause when he break that door and come in there, they'd pour that whiskey down the sink. Them people was slick with that whiskey, I'm tellin' you for sure. I tell you what kind of times they had with that whiskey: the same kind of times they havin' with this weed.

Springer: When did you decide to make money with your music?

Shaw: The same boy what we were listenin' a while ago, we called him Shine. [Before the interview we had listened to some Texas pianists on a record]. He was real dark, nice complexion dark, smooth skin guy. His name was Harold Holiday and it's a lot of tricks to that stuff when you learn . . . I was playin' for a lady had a girl, wasn't a girl, she was a woman; I was about grown too and I could play pretty good, but nothin' like I can now. But anyway another the guy was a friend of my daddy. He knew my daddy and he knew me too. But I was gettin' pretty close up there among the best. So, where this guy went on Fridays and Saturdays to gamble, it was more money there than where I was playin' and those people knew this guy 'cause he come there all the time. So they asked him about me and they said 'I been tryin' to get old Shaw to play for 'em, but I can't get him'. Said 'Where he playin' at?'. He said 'He's down there at Stafford at . . .' what was that woman's name . . . but anyhow, she had a daughter named Betty. Nice looking girl! So I was playin' for them. It ain't but a ten to fifteen-minute ride from Houston out to this place. So, I was 'round there on the streets in Houston one evenin' it was rainin'. He come by there and there was Duff Gibbs. He said 'Wait a minute there, I wanna see you'. He says 'So, where you playin' at?'. I say 'I'm playin' down there at . . .' I can't think of that woman's name, but anyhow he say 'Daniels told me he wants you to play for him, but they tolle me you was hangin' round ole Betty. Now, let me tell you one thing about women: don't ever lose a lot of time with a woman that *you* want and you get somebody want *you*!' and he started me thinkin'. He said 'That old gal don't want you. They wanna keep you down there and they ain't gonna pay you nothin' much for playin' 'cause you hang around that ole gal and they got their music for nothin''. And so, I didn't go down there anymore. He took me down there with *them*. I don't believe I saw the people anymore if it do any good, but anyway, then I commenced to learnin' how to make it around those type of places. Now, he could start from here to California in the morning with two dollars . . . gas wasn't but ten cents a gallon . . . he'd go as far as San Marcos and he'd stop. And he'd have on a blue serge suit, a black suit and a pair of enamel clap slippers, white socks, white shirt and a bow-tie, just dressed to death! And he'd go in one of those beer places and he'd start talkin' to the ugliest woman is in that town and ain't gonna be long, she might have on an apron where she'd been washin', she just come in to get a bottle of beer and he get to talkin' to her and tellin' 'bout he's lookin' for him a wife and if she wanted to get married . . . and first thing you know she's leavin' a tip down there and she go round and she bring him four-five dollars; oh he's booger, oh man, he was slick, but I tell you something else too: anytime he sat down to a poker table and they play the game there they call 'cutch', when the money's played out, it's gonna be where *he* is. Oh, he could sure



Robert Shaw (Mack McCormick)

gamble, he's got smooth, keen little fingers, man, he can catch them cards, he can mark them cards and he wise me up on people.

Springer: Was he a musician too?

Shaw: No, just a gambler.

Springer: Did you follow him around?

Shaw: No, I didn't. But he wise me up. And I used to be in Houston on the streets and I'd be nice and clean and dressed up. Packs of cigarettes stickin' up here in my pocket and I wasn't makin' a half a block, I wouldn't have a cigarette: 'Say buddy, say gimme a cigarette'. Before I make three steps: 'Say, hello there, how you doin'. Say, gimme a cigarette'. I said 'Now, I'm gonna have to do something'.

I knowed another ole boy hangin' around the streets all the time and he was a hustlin' guy too. I see him one day, he got ready for a cigarette, run his hand in his side-pocket and pull his cigarettes out and put 'em back in his side-pocket and he was standin' there smokin'. A guy come up 'Say, gimme a cigarette'. 'No, I just pitched my packet'. I tell you, he'd just put them back in his pocket, he didn't give him any. You don't keep your cigarettes where people can see 'em, always bumming a cigarette. You learn all that kinda stuff, I'm sorry, but if you just keep yourself a cigarette, you'll be happy. 'Cause you can't keep yourself in cigarettes and other folks too!

Springer: So, the first place you played was where that woman had a daughter called Betty, but you weren't making any money . . .

Shaw: No. And a dollar a night was about the best you could get.

Springer: How old were you then?

Shaw: Around seventeen, eighteen.

Springer: How long did you keep that up?

Shaw: Until . . . the saddest thing that ever happened, I was around the Gulf Coast down there: Corpus Christi, Kingsville and I come on up San Antone. I come out of Kingsville to Campbellton, Campbellton to San Antone, from San Antone here [Austin], in 1929. I had been to Kilgore and more people in that town

then, the county couldn't hold so many people there, there's oil field, and I kinda caught on to myself there. I commenced to get sho' 'nuff good then and I kinda noticed myself another old boy outta Houston come up there: his name was Roadside¹. He's a good player too, you know. Boy, he was salty! Oh, he was rough! And I stayed 'round them good piano-players. I liked their timin': it be so smooth and I tell you what . . . some pianists have trouble with their piano-playin': they try to do everything with their right hand, but you run out of that last word in that verse and get to drop, you gonna have to step down for that chorus, you gotta do it with this hand [shows his left hand]. Either shoot it up or down: that's what makes the music sound good. But if you just stay in a natural beat, it's just like beatin' on a box. That's where the trick is in this music.

So, when I'm comin' here, there's an ole boy here by the name of Boot Waller², he played piano too. Well, I didn't know him, so I rode or hot-shot in here out of San Antone. I got off the train, come on downtown, down on 6th Street, an ole boy down there by the name of Coodle Goose . . .

Springer: What?

Shaw: Coodle Goose! (laughs). Too much name for me! So I asked him where the sporty class of people hang out. He said 'Like who?'. I said 'Piano-players and things'. He said 'Ole boy live down here. Come on, I'll go down there a way with you'. So it was round two o'clock, the sun was hot, was in March and we come down 'bout twelve-, fourteen-hundred block on East 6th and went over one block on 5th and Waller and he live right back down there, 'bout just time he was eatin' and I ain't never been here before, don't know nobody. So I says 'I'm a piano-player and I'm lookin' for other piano-players to tell me where to stay. I just got in here'. So he said 'Say, play a piece on that piano'. So I did and they commence lookin' at each other, sayin' 'Say, he sure can play, can't he!'. And they all wanted to know me then, all

the ladies commenced comin' in from outside. So I said 'I'd appreciate if you could tell me somewhere to stay tonight'. They said 'Oh, we'll fix you somewhere to stay. You can stick around here'. So he say 'All the street women be round here when you get off the street round twelve, one o'clock'. That's where they'd come in and he'd sell 'em whiskey, you know. Man, the women commence comin' in around eleven-thirty, twelve o'clock that night and I got to playin' piano. They party round there until . . . Finally they all went home. The next mornin' several ole guys come round there: the women'd told 'em 'bout what a party he had in there that night. You know, he had money: twelve, fifteen dollars, that's a whole lot of money in them days. And they went back to the kitchen and they commence shootin' dice and I played the piano and there were four-five ole girls in there: Lillian, Little Mary, Little Sister, Big Sister; oh, that was them ace street-women and they was buyin' that whiskey fifty cents a half-a-pint. Fifty cents was just what a dollar and six bits for half-a-pint would cost you now.

So I went back there in the kitchen and they was around there shootin' dice, had their money all down there. I guess there was 'bout eighteen, twenty dollars in the game. So I got over there behind this ole boy what I'd stayed with that night. His name was Boot. He done shot off all his cuts and they'd beat him out of all this money from this whiskey he'd sold that night: he had about eighty-nine cents in his hand. So when them dice got to him, he told me, said 'Say, shoot them dice!'. And he pitched up thirty cents. I shot 'em. I throwed a 'leven right in the door. He said 'Sixty cents to shoot'. I shot for sixty cents. I throwed another 'leven right in the door and from then on, when I got through shootin', I guess he had about four-five dollars in. Wasn't too long, crap got back to him again and he pitched up a dollar and I shot the dollar and caught a four and I made it and he said 'Two-ace shoot' and I shot the two and I hit him another 'leven right then. When I left out of there, I wasn't in there but fifteen minutes, wasn't a soul in there had a quarter: I done broke every one of 'em, but, you see, all this money was for him, 'cause he was doin' all thebettin'. I didn't have nothin'. So they looked at me, one of them ole guys, I think his name was Brock, he said 'That goddam raggedy son-of-a-bitch' (laughs). He said 'You always got some old raggedy guy round here that's gonna broke all of us'. Old Boot told him 'You hustlin' son-of-a-so-and-so, go and get some money and come back for some more gamble'. Now, he had got all the money then (laughs) and then he talked to them like they were long gone . . . I wasn't in there ten minutes, broke every one of 'em.

So, you know, the laws had a racket here right in those days. Everybody they saw on the streets, thought they was any kind of hustlin' person, they'd arrest him, put 'im in jail. He paid two dollars on his fine and one and a half or two dollars a week and they let him out. But he better pay that dollar and a half or they gonna arrest him again! And they had just about all the street people in town was on the books down there at the jail-house. So I think they had old Boot 'bout twenty times. Carnival would come in here and he left here, playin' for this carnival and he left me here, said 'Bob, you can have the house. Man, I'm gonna get outa here. I'm never gonna pay all them fines'. So he left here and he was gone. I stayed out here a while and I went to Taylor. I played there one Saturday night and I stayed there almost until the week was ended and I went to Brenham. I got in Brenham on a Thursday night, I believe, and I played for them people down there Friday and Saturday. Monday mornin' I walked downtown, 'bout ten o'clock. Was two boys sittin' there on a rock. I spoke to them - young men around twenty-four, twenty-five years. I say 'How you fellas doin'? Which way you guys



(Mike Rowe)

goin'?"'. 'Oh, we goin' to Oklahoma City', 'Hot stuff! You know I oughta go up there with y'all'. Said 'Why don't you come on and go?'. I said 'No'. Said 'Aw, man, come on'. He said 'What do you know?'. I said 'I'm a piano-player'. He said 'Man, they need you in Oklahoma City'. I said 'What?'. He said 'Yes, come on! We be leavin' in about twenty-thirty minutes. That freight oughta get in here about twenty-thirty minutes'. So I stood there and talked, stood there and talked and after while, that freight squall comin' up the track: whoaa [imitates], comin' in town. Santa Fe she pull in there . . . and I caught it with 'em. Rode on up to a little place and stopped. You could buy a watermelon for a dime. We bought a watermelon and I had four-five dollars, but I had a little tobacco-sack and had it pinned over my underwear in here, you know, and if I ever got hungry, I'd get off to myself and get me fifteen cents and I could eat, you know.

So we went on through Somerville, Buckholts. We got into Temple 'bout four o'clock. We went over to Jay's mama's house and we laid down and went to sleep. So about eight or nine o'clock, we went over to one of those good timin' houses: they had 'em in Temple too. I got to playin' there. Man, that house filled up in 'bout fifteen, twenty minutes. They partied, got drunk, dance. I never will forget it: ole boy grabbed big ole brown skin girl, they got to dancin': 'Oh' said 'She big and fat and black and juicy'. God, that tickled me! (laughs). That was on a Thursday. On a Friday, we decided to get out of there, we went down there to that track. Man, there was more boys on that freight train than there was box-cars. We couldn't leave then. We waited till that Sunday morning. I went on back down on the streets down there and played piano at parties the rest of the night and then I went to sleep until 'bout ten o'clock.

Went back down there. We got out 'bout two o'clock that Sunday. Went on to Fort Worth and we got out of Fort Worth about six-fifteen. We got to Fort Worth about six o'clock and we got one that leave out there, pulls white caboose, black nose: they call him Mark 1st. Oh man, when it leave there it's gone! And it pulled out

there just at sundown. I heard them talk about Mark Fulsom, but I'm green: this is my first trip! Run to Chickashee 'bout twelve o'clock. It never stopped from Fort Worth until we got to Chickashee, Oklahoma.

And we had to go about two blocks out in the bushes out there to get some water, but the freight, it cut loose and it was just as black as any night you ever seen, and them guys went just as straight to that well out there in them bushes as ever you saw in your life. *They* done rode it before and we got some water, we come back and got into the box-car and after a while, the train hooked up and left and it was doin' the same thing when daylight come, sun way up yonder and still running. It run up in El Reno, Oklahoma about eight o'clock and we quit it there. And we had to wait until eleven, I believe, until that local come from Oklahoma City and then go back 'cause the track we went into El Reno, Oklahoma didn't go to Oklahoma City and it's twenty-eight miles from Oklahoma City to El Reno. And we caught that local out there at two o'clock and we got into Oklahoma City around two-thirty or three.

We went on out to the North part of town, 'cause this boy Roy had a place out there and, man, we found somewhere to go to sleep. I slept two days before I even moved! So this other boy Eddie and I, we went to a little lady's house, dark lady, never will forget her. And she had a piano sittin' in the corner, so he told her, said 'I got a guy with me and he says he play the piano. I want him to play something here'. So she say 'Yeah, yeah, let him play some'. So I played a tune or two and, man, she really had a house full of people in a few minutes. So they got to drinkin' that chock beer and whiskey and we all got drunk and now you . . . Now, you've heard this about 'The Lord will take care of fools' . . . All right! I thought I had some sense, but I never had on *that* day. There's two girls come over from next door. They lived in a small house over there and they got so high they did hardly know their way home and they asked me to come and go home with them. So I went home with 'em and one set down on the front of the bed, the other set down on this

part of the bed, I set down in the middle. And those girls were pretty high and I was too, 'cause we'd been drinkin' that stuff. Hot! And they laid back on the bed and I did too and all three of us went to sleep. Now, suppose some ole guy had come in there you couldn't talk to . . . Do you see what I'm talkin' about? All right, we slept there until about five-thirty, six o'clock. I woke up 'fore any of 'em. I jumped straight up. I said 'You oughta have more sense than *this*'. I said 'I never seen these people before and I'm sleepin' with two women I've never seen before'. Nice-looking girls, man, they were beauties. So I got ready to go, said 'No, we don't want you to go, we want to take you somewhere'. Hear what I'm fixin' to get into now! . . . They got in their bath, put on their little street dresses and here we go!

We got to a place where there was a lot: wasn't nothin' on this lot but this one big buildin', but that was the club-house. We walked up and there was trees all round out in there, but they wasn't stacked close to one another. Here one in a big field, here another . . . People played cards a lot in those days. So I looked and kinda wake myself. This is what I been lookin' for! So we went on in the house. First we went into the dance part. There was a baby grand settin' in the corner, spankin' brand new and everythin': oh man, just shining! I kind of wakened myself, said 'Man, I oughta get some hustlin' goin' on over here'. So I went over to that piano, never did set down, and I just hit it. Zoom! All the women straightened up just like that and they get to lookin' and I hit it again. Zoom! Said 'You know I believe he can play that piano!'. So all at once, a little brown skin lady got up — girl 'bout twenty-one or twenty-two years old. She said 'Couple-walk 'cross the street here with me. I'm gonna put on my dress so I can get back dancin' tonight'. So I said OK. Them other girls what I was with, they'd gone back over there. So they live right across the street and just about time we walked up on the steps, fellow what run the place come up and he was married to a lady who had a daughter. She was about seventeen, eighteen. She told him, says 'Ooh, man, you see that guy over

yonder with that blue shirt on? He sure can play that piano'. And I hadn't even played nothin'! So he called me. He said 'Hey, buddy, come here!'. I said 'I'll be down in a minute. This lady gonna change'. He said 'Come here! Right now!'. I said 'I'll be down in a minute'. I kinda knew what he wanted. So she got her dress changed and we got back over there. He said 'Hey, my wife say you can play that piano'. 'I can', I say, 'sure was no dream'. Said 'What you charge to play here tonight?'. I said 'How long you want me to play?'. 'Oh, from 'bout nine to one'. I said 'Dollar-a-half a hour'. Ooh, man, I got into it then!! He said 'Where you come from?' (laughs). I say 'I come outta Texas'. He says 'Well, you better go back to Texas. You must be son-of-a-so-and-so! . . . Hey, I didn't mean it'. So I didn't say no more, 'cause I didn't know nobody. I didn't even know nobody's name, didn't hardly know mine. So I went on down there among those gamblin' guys and set down and listen to them talkin'. They all knew I was a new guy around there. Wasn't too long, here's a piano-player feller and he went on in there and he got to playin' and he played and he played. Man, you talk about people, just like the leaves on that tree. But they was all outside and he had a man at the door gettin' two bits apiece, you know, to come in. There wasn't nobody in there but that piano-player and the man on the door. So about a hour, he come back out there and he says 'Where that ole Texas guy?'. Said 'Here he is'. Said 'Tell him I said come here!'. So he said 'It's 'bout ten o'clock; what do you charge to play from ten till one?'. I told him 'Two dollars an hour'. He said 'But you just told me 'a dollar-a-half!''. I said 'Let me explain this to you if you will: the longer the time is, the less per hour and the shorter the time, the more per hour'. I said 'That's the way it works, 'cause you haven't dealt with many musicians then'. So he say 'You know what?'. I said 'No'. He said 'I'm gonna pay you two dollars just to play one hour. That's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna do that'. I said 'I'll play it for you'. I went on in there, sat down at the piano and I played one piece and when I got through, I think about six or eight couples was on the floor dancin'. So I stopped and chatted and told a little joke, thing like that and they got to laughin'. While we were talkin' and goin' on some were still comin' in. When I got through with the second piece, I guess he had twenty couples in there. And then he said to me 'You see these forty-nine-cent glasses gin' - you know, 'bout six-eight ounce glass - he said to order them half full of whiskey. I sat down and looked at him: 'He won't get all this stuff in me, for sure'.

So, wasn't too long, here he come. It was gettin' on down in the night then. I didn't have but ten or fifteen more minutes to go, but, man, that floor was crowded! So I went over there to the door, you know. They were drinking and laughin' and havin' a good time. I said to the door-man 'Say, how much did you get off the door?'. I think he said about sixty-somethin'. Man, that was plenty money, for the times was hard. I didn't have but two dollars comin' up. So I went up back there and got him, said 'Come here. Come back there and check with your door-man and see what he got'. He said 'I tell you one thing: you go and play the piano. I'll pay you'. And, when time was up, you know, eleven o'clock, I said 'Well, that's it!'. He said 'Unh-unh, I'll pay you two dollars an hour' and I played for him.

That was my first week in Oklahoma City. I walked downtown that Monday mornin' and a fellow come up to me and we got to talkin'. I told him I was a piano-player and he said 'Why don't you come up to the studio? I'm a jockey. We might have some room for you'. So I went up there and about the next hour . . . I got on that same evenin'. I got twenty-five dollars a week for fifteen minutes, didn't play but two



Robert Shaw (Norbert Hess)

pieces! But the same evenin' I come off there, KFXR radio-station, a rich doctor called the disc-jockey and told him to send me out to his house that night.

Springer: Was that a black station?

Shaw: White. But this was a black fellow that I'd started off with, but I was gettin' over to the white side then. Well, then it was gettin' right into Xmas and I was playin' a big club downtown. So, this doctor had a big party goin' on in Tulsa and he hired Oxen [?] to play in my place and I went to Tulsa to play that Xmas dance.

Springer: How long did you stay in Oklahoma?

Shaw: About two years and I left and went to Kansas City. And I stayed there four or five months or more.

Springer: Why did you go?

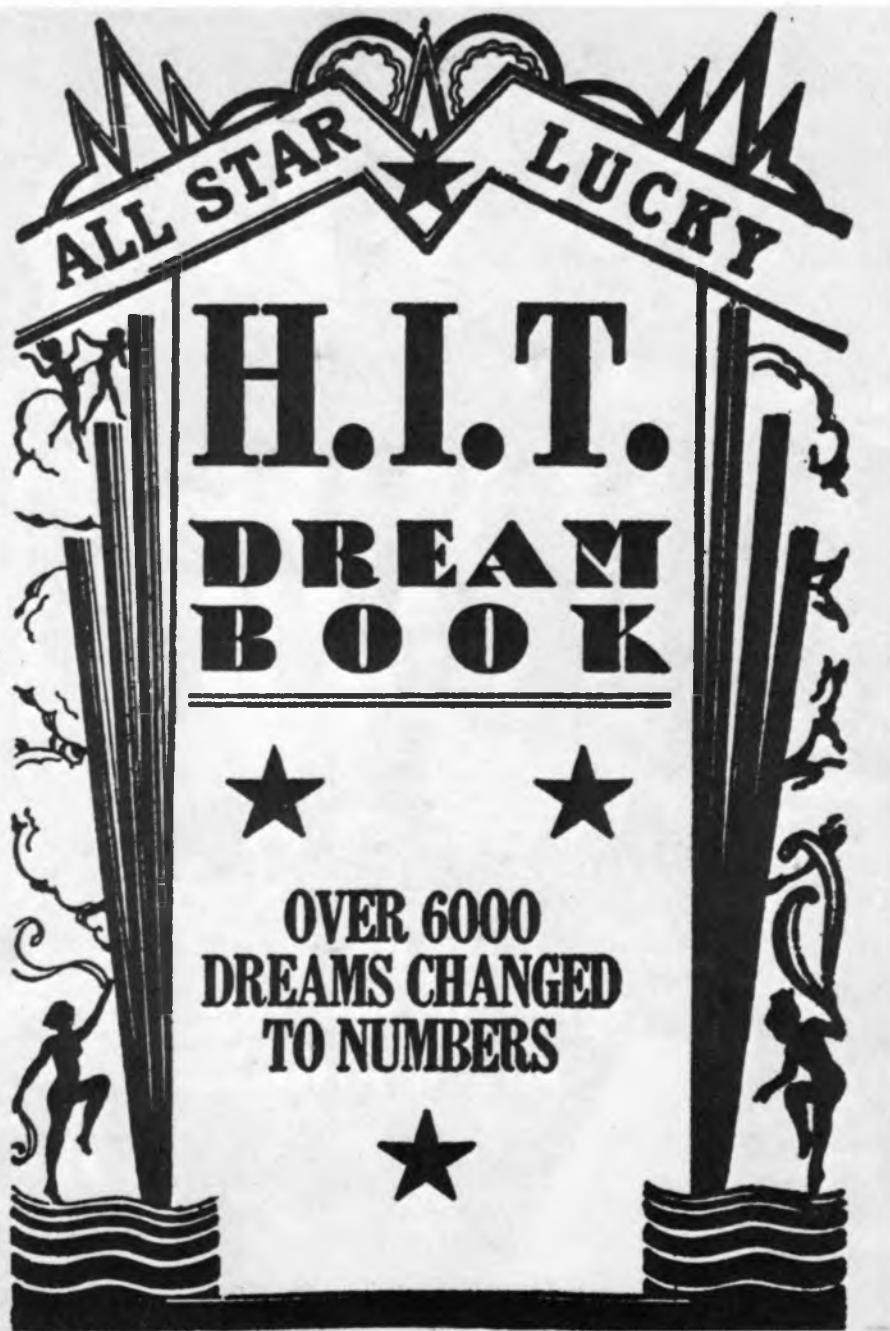
Shaw: I just heard so much about Kansas City, I just wanted to go and see for myself.

Springer: What was it you heard about K.C.?

Shaw: Well, they had a blues they used to sing about 'I'm goin' to Kansas City, baby don't you

wanna go'. But I run into a lot of static there!

I got into K.C. one morning about four o'clock and I asked a guy was there a cabaret was open all night, was a place that stay open all night . . .? Say 'Yeah man, go right there at the corner, go right down the street about two blocks'. Just as I walked up there, man, cars full of laws come from everywhere! But I never did stop goin' to 'em. I just kept going to them and I looked down, big sack of flour layin' in the street: store had been broken into and they never asked me a thing. So I stayed there a little while. So finally, I went on up the street where I was goin'. Walked in there. A guy looked at me, he say 'Where you come from? Didn't I see you in Houston about a month ago?'. I say 'I spect so!'. 'Did you play a party on Rooten [?] Street in the fifteen-hundred block?'. I say 'Yeah'. He say 'I was there. Don't you remember me?'. I said 'Not clearly, I don't. I done saw so many people since then'. He says 'I'll tell you what. Come on let's eat a chilli and drink a beer' - and you could get a stew-pot full



of beer for a dime - 'and I want you to play me a piece'. So I went on and I got to playin' and, man, you talkin' 'bout people! I didn't know they was upstairs. There was enough of 'em downstairs. Man, when I hit that piano, whoo . . . they come from upstairs! And a guy come from there, bright guy, curly hair and he looked down on me and he said 'Don't you play another god-durn tune!'. I said to myself 'What have I got into now?!'. And he didn't say no more! Finally he wanted to telephone, call a taxi and two women say 'I'm goin' too'. And we goin' to this club down here, 18th and Fores [Forest?]. That club carried everybody. Carried bums on the first floor and carried those that were just above bums on the second floor and the next best on the third floor and the real poppers on the fourth floor. The Panama Cabaret.

So we went up on the third floor and they commence to buyin' that white whiskey and I start to playin' this piano and, man, them people raised the fog until daylight. We went to this house, wasn't but two blocks up the street. He lived on Tracy & Fores. Right back there was a big big flat and when he ring that door-bell a woman come to that door, and he'd just left two more women he'd been with all

night. He's one of them really slickers: nice-looking feller, 'bout thirty years old. And that woman, her hair was black and all her hands here was black, but man, that was the prettiest black woman I ever seed in my life! And she had her teeth half-crowned 'long here. Just had chips of diamonds in 'em. When she laughed, you couldn't see nothin' but sparkles. Oh, she was beautiful! From her feet to the top of her head! So he said 'Go on and fix my friend a beer, we got to take some rest'. She got after him about doing something. 'Oh', he said, 'I'm gonna kill that son-of-a-so-and-so, so you won't get no more trouble' (laughs). So finally, we all go to sleep. He woke me up about three o'clock, said 'Get up and eat you something'. She'd done cooked some Louisiana dishes out of weedies, you know, something, one of them goulashes. I think she was from Louisiana. But anyway, we eat, we sit around there 'bout an hour. He said 'I'm gonna lay back down'. Well, I laid back down too. He woke me up 'bout twelve o'clock and said 'Let's go up here on 18th and Vine - that's where my break come there. We got up there that night and I stood around for a little while. Finally, I went there and I fool with that piano a little bit and the man who run the place wasn't there but he had two women was workin'

in there. So when he come, same thing happened to me in Oklahoma: 'See that little guy with the brown sweater on? He sure can play that piano'. So he called me and he give me a job, bought me a ticket, a union card, put me in the union and I played for him 'bout nine months.

Springer: But you said you were in K.C. about five months . . .

Shaw: Well, it was about nine months, 'cause I got there in March. Went from Oklahoma City to Kansas City.

Springer: Why did you leave K.C.?

Shaw: Musicians get tired of looking at people . . . I come back to Oklahoma City about four-five months.

Springer: You had a job there?

Shaw: Still had the job what I had, but here's what run me out of Oklahoma City. I had a fellow there was in this policy racket. Was a friend of mine. He was from here. This was his home [Austin]. And some guys come in there outa California and open up *another* wheel. Well, I was writing a little policy, just enough to have some fun. You don't know that numbers racket, do you?

Springer: I've heard about it!

Shaw: So, I was writing *his* book number. See, he was gettin' two bits on a dollar and he was only paying me fifteen. But I just done it for pastime. Well, I'd pick up three, four, five dollars a day, doin' nothing, sitting round, you know, writin' that number. Sometimes I'd catch a thing. That was a good way to keep my numbers on, I wasn't doin' nothin' nohow. So he told me, he said 'Come here, you ain't doin' nothin' around daytime. You play at night. Why don't you let me take this other wheel and let you be the head of the books there. Why, you can make two bits on the dollar. See, you ain't makin' but fifteen cents writin' under me for my book' - see, I'd turn in all my plays to *him*; I worked for this feller. I picked up them books and I take 'em to him: I meet him in a place where you take them books, you know, different writers: no.1, no.2, no.3, no.4 . . . I'd have sometimes fifteen, twenty books and the money is *they* money.

So, one evening there, I wrote I guess about twenty-five or thirty dollars' worth of that stuff and I went round there to a house where a bunch of women lived and I think *all* the women played that same number. Them women caught that number. Well, I'd taken that man them books that evening, like round six or seven o'clock when I'm supposed to pick up the money what was hit on the books at twelve o'clock. I taken them books down there that evening and that man . . . no, that was on a morning they hit that wheel and I take me them books at twelve o'clock and I stayed where he been picking up them books until this time of night, nine o'clock, and he ain't picked up them books yet. I stayed there that night; the next day, the people got to hollerin' 'bout they wanted their money. I couldn't pay 'em and I couldn't find the men. And so I just went on back and packed up my things and come here to Texas. They were slick guys!

Springer: How long did you stay in Texas?

Shaw: I've been in Texas ever since. For livin', but I've been playin' in several different counties.

Springer: Did you ever do logging camps, turpentine camps, etc. . . . like Little Brother and others?

Shaw: No. Was nothing that much round . . . Them logging camps, them people they had plenty money. They done a lot of gamblin' and stuff. You see, all this work you see they do with graders, with those machines now, they used to do that with mules and they used to call that camps too. I didn't play exactly for *them* but the men, they'd come to them places what I was playin'.

Springer: When you write a piece of music, what do you try to put into it to get to the

public?

Shaw: You know what makes a person think when you're fooling with music is the problem that you have and it rests on your mind, just like a piece of blues about . . . just like old boy, he had lady trouble and he got to singing this song 'bout (sings):

'In the evening, in the evenin', baby when the sun goes down
Ain't it lonesome, ain't it lonesome, babe,
when the one you love is not around.
Last night I lay a-sleepin', thinkin' to myself
Last night I lay a-sleepin', thinkin' to myself
Worried, thinkin' 'bout the girl I love and she lovin' someone else.'

I don't know who put that out. I just heard it on a record. If a record hit the market and it's anything that I like, well, I get it.

You know what I can do, I can go to a place and I can play one tune and I'll watch the phrases and the bars that I set this tune upon and watch the people and I can tell whether I test 'em or not. When I lead there with the next piece, I got 'em! The words is accordin' to what you want to sing about. You hear me singin' 'Piggly Wiggly': 'I got groceries on my shelf'? You rhyme the words in with whatever category that that thinkin' is on. Piggly Wiggly was a supermarket chain.

Now, people have had a pretty cultured type of life. He don't have the idea, he don't think about blues like a fellow that's been compressed. Just like, say, if you had to go back to France and you had to walk back, didn't know how you's gonna get back, it would put something on your mind, you'd have some kind of song (laughs) fixed up, I tell you for sure! Well, that's the way them songs come up.

Springer: Where do you get your songs from mostly? Others or yourself?

Shaw: Now, listen at this. I don't know whether you've heard this number. I got it in there [inside the house], I'm gonna play it in there. Now, if we was on a party and there was three or four girls there. An old black girl there, man she was, you talk about a handsome baby, she was a baby! Feet, eyes, legs, nose, mouth, everything fit! Her and two more girls was there and they left and about thirty-forty minutes, two-three of us left and another ole boy named Joe Pullum and we went, the house that face the street just like this and we went this-a-way two blocks and turned right and went up the street south and when we got about half-a-block up the street, we met them three girls comin' back. So Joe Pullum says to this girl what was with these other girls, this black girl, he said: 'Say black girl!'. She didn't say nothin'. Said 'Black girl!'. She just kept on walkin'. He said: 'What make your doggone head so hard?'. All right! Now, there was a boy down there named Purdue, and Shine and myself and Joe Pullum. Well, we went down to that party-house. Here Purdue come up playin' the blues and this gal come in the door: the same black gal and Joe Pullum here he come (sings falsetto): 'Black gal, black gal, woman, what make your nappy head so hard, I would come to see you, but your bad man has got me barred'. Joe Pullum brought that song up. Come right out of Fourth Ward, Houston, and he went on to say about (sings):

'I'm going to the 'sylum, I'm going to the 'sylum to see if I had lose my mind.'

I keep thinkin' and worrying 'bout that black gal all the time.'

I bet he sold a million records and that song come out of two men and half-a-pint of whiskey.

Springer: Purdue played the piano accompaniment for Joe Pullum . . . ?

Shaw: Purdue played it for him, Joe. He was just singin', he couldn't play and Purdue was a boy out of Third Ward, I don't know what his first name was. He left Houston and went to Chicago and hasn't been back there since. That



Joe Pullum (Decca Race Catalogue)



(Bill Greensmith)

was back in the twenties. That piece hit the market 'long about '24 or '25'. You oughta heard this Joe Pullum sing it. Man, he could bash your brains out! He had a *very* peculiar kind of voice and Purdue played it in B flat: (sings falsetto): 'Black gal, woman what make your head so hard.' Oh man, he could blow it! Springer: He was singing about 'your bad man's got me barred'. Where did he get this idea from? Because he'd only seen that girl at the party and on the street . . .

Shaw: That's all he saw! (laughs).

Springer: So why did he put that in?

Shaw: I don't know. He made that come up there some kind of way and then he said her head was just as hard as a two-by-four in some lumber-yard (laughs).

Springer: Just make it up . . . ?

Shaw: Yeah. Just make it up and make it come out to a rhyme, that all.

Springer: When you hear a piece you like, do you put the same words you heard when you play it later or some new ones?

Shaw: Sometimes the person that come up with the piece . . . You'll put a little more thinkin' in your idea. You gotta put some of you in there. If you learn to play a piece, you gotta play it your way, but after all it's his number. But if a person ask you can you play such and such a thing, you gotta play more you than the other feller, 'cause you can't do it like him.

Now, you take that old 'Piggly Wiggly', then 'Pinetop's Boogie Woogie': I been all over this country, can't find nobody can play that stuff like I play. Unh-unh.

Springer: Do you try to express your own feelings in your songs or do you try to express the feelings of some people who might be in the audience?

Shaw: You gotta put more of you in there than you do the other fellers, 'cause it's hard to be someone else.

Springer: Did you buy a lot of records in the twenties?

Shaw: Well, them babies, they were buggers! It was some whips! Music will never get as great as that music what come out in the twenties. And they find themselves they gon' be right back there where the twenties were. Music just don't get no better than *that* music. It was tremendous!

Springer: What were your preferences?

Shaw: I liked Bessie Smith's style.

Springer: Some thought there was too much jazz behind it, it was too commercialized, more than the country blues singers . . .

Shaw: I tell you how that come about. Now, in puttin' music together for to entertain people, you have to study that stuff just like you do anything else. You know, sometime when you express yourself and this question that come up concerns more people than just one. You gonna have to make it just a little broader than if it don't concern nobody but you.

Springer: What piano-players influenced you, mainly?

Shaw: That ole boy, Shine, and another boy by the name of Jack Coleman. They both were older than I was, say, three or four years. Both of 'em dead.

Oh that Jack Coleman, he could drink more whiskey than you could pour out! But that old rascal could sure fight them keys! Man, he'd bite that bottom lip, but he could fight them keys, he run you crazy! He was from Houston. Springer: Were there lots of piano-players in Houston?

Shaw: They runnin' out your ears! If you needed a piano-player in the twenties and thirties all you had to do is sit on your porch and soon enough you'd have one crossin' the street. Well, I mean, good ones too! And they ain't there no more. People dead!

Springer: You were a little younger than most of them . . .

Shaw: No. I was right along there, I was pretty close up there. But lots of 'em was older than I

was. But I know two brothers, man, they didn't come no better! One named Scanty and the other named Willie B. Smith. They was in they days, like in the early twenties . . . song like (sings):

'How come you do me like you do do do, I ain't done nothin' to you.'

Treat me right or let me be,
I can beat you doin' what you doin' to me.
How come you do me like you do.'

Man, that ole Scanty could run you crazy with that. Willie B., either one of 'em couldn't count to ten you'd understand what he said. They was kinda off-side people, bbbb, mmmm, they talked like that. But man, that's all they done was play that piano and get drunk *every day*!

Springer: Did anybody outside Texas influence you?

Shaw: Did you know, from Galveston, from Louisiana, say, yeah from Louisiana, I'll put it that a-way: all round that Gulf Coast to San Antone, did you know it afforded all the piano-players that they needed in London come in that country. They just couldn't stay; them piano-players was too tough down there. Them piano-players was rough there in Houston. Oh man, them babies was *salty*! You'd hear them pianos whistlin', just talkin' like a man. And like I been all through the country, you didn't hear no kind of piano-players. They felt their music just didn't come up to them. But Houston had a different style of music, had that jazz to it and they could just bounce, you know, like that and tote you. Houston, Galveston, from Louisiana on down.

Springer: Did you meet people like Sykes, Little Brother in the early days?

Shaw: I met 'em in the later days. They didn't get down that far. I don't know why no piano-players didn't come in that part of the country, but they had some salty dogs down there. You take this ole boy Willie Pickens and Shine, Jack Coleman, Rusty Johnson and Scanty Smith, Willie B. Smith, Peg Leg Will, Robert Shade, Dee and I ain't called half of 'em. Man, them people was salty! And all those boys are dead.

They had a ole boy in Galveston, name was

Andy Boy. I don't know whether he's dead or not. Man, he's salty, whoo! He was rough!

Springer: What sorts of places did you like to play best?

Shaw: I loved clubs and special engagements and things like that. Well, I tell you what turned me to jazz. I used to play popular music when I was tryin' to learn to play the piano and this boy Roadside, he could play more popular music than you could name. Well, this boy Shine and Jack Coleman and all them other guys what I was tellin' you about were dressed up and nice and clean, shoes shined *every day*, but they was playin' at these drinkin' places. Now, at a popular place you play a piece and (claps slowly and coldly) that's all they got for you . . . Now, you can play a piece in jazz at a club, roadhouse or dancing-hall or whatever you might call it . . . old gal walk up there and give me five dollars, say 'Hey, play my piece'. And if I make like I'm ready to go, she like to give me twenty dollars: 'Say, play my piece here'. That's the way they do you 'round them places. And if you were in the orchestra, you make fifteen dollars a night, with your board and your laundry, but you makin' a flat fifteen dollar clear profit. All right! Now, if you get your drinks, you gonna have to put in on this drink, put in on this drink, you wind up you ain't made but six dollars on that night! Now, I'm gonna be in this club, I'm gonna make *fifty* dollars, better nights make a hundred.

Springer: And you get your drinks free . . . ?

Shaw: Pooh! What you talkin' 'bout, more drinks than I can drink! See.

Springer: Do you try to play every piano style?

Shaw: I've learnt that being yourself is more than tryin' to be somebody else.

Springer: Now, what about Alex Moore in Dallas? He also plays Texas style, don't you think?

Shaw: I never have heard him!

Springer: Do you know other piano-players outside Houston that used to be?

Shaw: Now, Andy Boy was a top kicker there in Galveston. Now, he was good, he was sure good. Oh man, he could play some of the durn-



(Bill Greensmith)



Robert Shaw (Mike Rowe)

dest songs and the piano'd be talking just as smooth as he be talking. That's what you mean 'bout playing the piano, play it *smooth*! And it was a long time before I could really get that thing drilled out like it should be when I was learnin', but when I fooled around there one day and I got to handlin' them notes and them notes come out just as smooth and clear, I say: 'That's the way I want this thing to sound!'.

Springer: Did you teach yourself to read the notes?

Shaw: I had someone to teach me the notes. In the twenties.

Springer: Why did you think it was useful to know the notes?

Shaw: I wanted something to protect myself. Sometime it throws you a little late. Come on, let me show you something. [We go back inside for more piano.]

Springer: Did you ever meet Blind Lemon Jefferson?

Shaw: No. I heard lots of him, but I never did meet him! I wasn't much of a lad when he was runnin'. I wasn't allowed out the yard when he was cuttin' up.

Springer: Did you ever bump into people like Texas Alexander?

Shaw: No.

Springer: What about Mance Lipscomb?

Shaw: I met Mance Lipscomb in the sixties.

Springer: And Lightnin' Hopkins?

Shaw: I run into Hopkins in the sixties too.

Springer: So you were really not in contact with any guitar-players. Only pianists.

Shaw: Nothing but those guys in Houston clear up to Louisiana way, but I got acquainted with those after I left Houston. They just didn't never come round in the southern part. Now you take them boys, them good piano-players what's dead, they never got no further round that Gulf Coast. I'm the only one that ever left there.

Springer: Did you ever see any piano-players in those minstrel-shows and medicine-shows they used to have?

Shaw: Yeah, there was a bunch of 'em, but I

never did know any of 'em because they all come from . . . they pick up them people out of Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia and all down in there. They pick up them musicians.

Springer: What sort of music would they play?

Shaw: They playing 'Dinah', and 'Red Hot Mama', 'Sweet Georgia Brown'. They play some blues and such songs like 'How Come You Do Me Like You Do' and, oh man, they could whup that out, 'Baby Won't You Please Come Home', 'Baby Where You Stay Last Night' and all that kind of stuff.

Springer: What about the medicine shows?

Shaw: That's what they were playing. Minstrel-shows, medicine-shows. Same thing!

Springer: I always thought the medicine-shows were too small to have piano-players . . .

Shaw: No, no. Unh-unh. Oh man, that's what they sell that medicine on, with the minstrel shows! That music there they play, 'Sweet Georgia Brown', but you see, they chop it up so bad you wouldn't know what it was. Ta tatata ta ta ta ta tatata. That's ragtime style, that's what they played 'Georgia Brown' on. And then, when they quit dancin', the comedians go back in the tent, then the man he's ready to sell his medicine. And this was good for anything in the world. If you were blind, it make you see, if you had one leg, you'd have two next mornin' if you take it. This medicine was good for nothin', it wouldn't cure nothin'. That's the way they ought to had it! And them people, them poor ladies, run up with them aprons on you know, just got through: 'Er, gimme two bottles . . .' (laughs). Wasn't nothin' but coffee water, ah, ah. They'd have a piano and a trumpet and a drum and a trombone; a four-piece orchestra and a gal or two, and a feller or two and he would do that buck-dancin' and them ladies would jump and shake their hips and squat and do the Charleston and they be shakin' their hips: (sings):

'If I could shimmy like my sister Kate
Jelly roll like the jelly rollin' in the plate
Jelly roll, jelly roll sure is hard to find
Ain't a baker shop in town can roll jelly
like mine.'

Man, they'd cut up! And then here comes this man: (shouts) 'Doctor Vaughn's Medicine!'. Ha, ha. Them people buy a truck-load of that medicine in one night.

Springer: Did you ever work on those things?

Shaw: No, I never did work on those medicine-shows.

Springer: Did those medicine-shows come into town as well as in the country? Big cities like Houston?

Shaw: Yeah. Sure! They'd be standin' on the street, on the sidewalk until they run 'em off. They know that medicine wasn't nothing, they're robbin' the people, you know, with their junk and they parkin' in the cities there. You know, that was before the cities got popular enough to make 'em buy licenses, cut out certain things and let other things go. You know, cities ain't gonna stand and see somebody come here and rob the people just because they know how. And that's all that was: that medicine, oh man, it take corns off your feet, if your hair was short, it was good for *that*, oh man, it make somebody love you, who you wanted to, and you wanted them and they didn't want you! Oh man, it was good for everything!

Springer: I thought the medicine shows were never big enough to have a piano . . .

Shaw: Oh man, they did! In a panel truck, 'bout a ton-and-a-half truck, a ton truck, you know, something like that, ten-twelve foot long, that piano setting up there on it. Them medicine-shows'd stay in the town sometime a week!

Notes

1 Reported as 'Roadhouse' elsewhere.

2 Boot Walton - see Dr. Hep Cat article.

3 On record at least Pullum's accompanist was Rob Cooper or Andy Boy. 'Black Gal' was recorded in 1934.